

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF NEW JERSEY

WILLIAM QUINONEZ,

Plaintiff,

v.

CAMDEN COUNTY PRISON SYSTEM
and COUNTY FEDERAL COURTS,

Defendants.

HONORABLE JEROME B. SIMANDLE

Civil Action
No. 17-cv-00179 (JBS-AMD)

OPINION

APPEARANCES

William Quinonez, Plaintiff Pro Se
616 South 4th Street
Camden, NJ 08103

SIMANDLE, Chief District Judge:

1. Plaintiff William Quinonez seeks to bring a civil rights complaint pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against Camden County Prison System ("CCPS"), an entity he calls County Federal Courts ("the Courts"), the City of Camden ("City"), and the Camden County Jail ("CCJ") for allegedly unconstitutional conditions of confinement. Complaint, Docket Entry 1.

2. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2) requires courts to review complaints prior to service in cases in which a plaintiff is proceeding *in forma pauperis*. Courts must *sua sponte* dismiss any claim that is frivolous, is malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. This action is

subject to *sua sponte* screening for dismissal under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) because Plaintiff is proceeding *in forma pauperis*.

3. For the reasons set forth below, the Court will: (1) dismiss the Complaint with prejudice as to claims made against CCJ; (2) dismiss the Complaint with prejudice as to claims made against the Courts; and (3) dismiss the Complaint without prejudice for failure to state a claim. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(b)(ii).

Claims Against CCJ: Dismissed With Prejudice

4. Plaintiff brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983¹ for alleged violations of Plaintiff's constitutional rights. In order to set forth a *prima facie* case under § 1983, a plaintiff must show: "(1) a person deprived him of a federal right; and (2) the person who deprived him of that right acted under color of state or territorial law." *Groman v. Twp. of Manalapan*, 47 F.3d 628, 633 (3d Cir. 1995) (citing *Gomez v. Toledo*, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980)).

5. Generally, for purposes of actions under § 1983, "[t]he term 'persons' includes local and state officers acting

¹ Section 1983 provides: "Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State . . . subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress" 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

under color of state law." *Carver v. Foerster*, 102 F.3d 96, 99 (3d Cir. 1996) (citing *Hafer v. Melo*, 502 U.S. 21 (1991)).² To say that a person was "acting under color of state law" means that the defendant in a § 1983 action "exercised power [that the defendant] possessed by virtue of state law and made possible only because the wrongdoer [was] clothed with the authority of state law." *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 49 (1988) (citation omitted). Generally, then, "a public employee acts under color of state law while acting in his official capacity or while exercising his responsibilities pursuant to state law." *Id.* at 50.

6. Because the Complaint has not sufficiently alleged that a "person" deprived Plaintiff of a federal right, the Complaint does not meet the standards necessary to set forth a *prima facie* case under § 1983. In the Complaint, Plaintiff seeks monetary damages from CCJ for allegedly unconstitutional conditions of confinement. The CCJ, however, is not a "person" within the meaning of § 1983; therefore, the claims against it must be dismissed with prejudice. *See Crawford v. McMillian*, 660 F. App'x 113, 116 (3d Cir. 2016) ("[T]he prison is not an entity

² "Person" is not strictly limited to individuals who are state and local government employees, however. For example, municipalities and other local government units, such as counties, also are considered "persons" for purposes of § 1983. *See Monell v. N.Y.C. Dep't of Social Services*, 436 U.S. 658, 690-91 (1978).

subject to suit under 42 U.S.C. § 1983.") (citing *Fischer v. Cahill*, 474 F.2d 991, 992 (3d Cir. 1973)); *Grabow v. Southern State Corr. Facility*, 726 F. Supp. 537, 538-39 (D.N.J. 1989) (correctional facility is not a "person" under § 1983). Given that the claims against the CCJ must be dismissed with prejudice, the claims may not proceed and Plaintiff may not name the CCJ as a defendant.

7. Plaintiff may be able to amend the Complaint to name a person or persons who were personally involved in the alleged unconstitutional conditions of confinement, however. To that end, the Court shall grant Plaintiff leave to amend the Complaint within 30 days of the date of this order.

Claims Against County Federal Courts:
Dismissed With Prejudice

8. Claims brought against "County Federal Courts" (Docket Entry 1 at 1) must be dismissed with prejudice, as the judges of the Courts have absolute judicial immunity. Although Mr. Quinonez uses the term "County Federal Courts" once in the caption of his Complaint, it is unclear whether he means to refer to the Superior Court of New Jersey (Camden County) or the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey (Federal Court) or both. Nothing in the complaint alleges what any court has done to deprive him of constitutional rights in the Camden County Jail. Moreover, even if Plaintiff were to be more

specific about what he is attempting to allege, it is apparent such a claim is barred by judicial immunity. "It is a well-settled principle of law that judges are generally 'immune from a suit for money damages.'" *Figueroa v. Blackburn* , 208 F.3d 435, 440 (3d Cir. 2000) (quoting *Mireles v. Waco* , 502 U.S. 9, 11 (1991)). "A judge will not be deprived of immunity because the action he took was in error, was done maliciously, or was in excess of his authority." *Stump v. Sparkman* , 435 U.S. 349, 356 (1978). Furthermore, "[a] judge is absolutely immune from liability for his judicial acts even if his exercise of authority is flawed by the commission of grave procedural errors." *Id.* at 359. "[Judicial] immunity is overcome in only two sets of circumstances." *Mireles* , 502 U.S. at 11. "First, a judge is not immune from liability for non-judicial acts, *i.e.* , actions not taken in the judge's judicial capacity." *Id.* In determining whether an act qualifies as a "judicial act," courts look to "the nature of the act itself, *i.e.* , whether it is a function normally performed by a judge, and to the expectation of the parties, *i.e.* , whether they dealt with the judge in his judicial capacity." *Stump* , 435 U.S. at 362. "Second, a judge is not immune for actions, though judicial in nature, taken in the complete absence of all jurisdiction." *Mireles* , 502 U.S. at 12.

9. Both of these exceptions are inapplicable here. Plaintiff has not set forth any facts that would suggest that

judges of the Courts engaged in nonjudicial acts, nor has Plaintiff alleged facts demonstrating that any actions by the Courts were taken in the clear absence of all jurisdiction. The judges of the Courts are therefore entitled to complete judicial immunity.

10. Furthermore, absolute quasi-judicial immunity applies to "public employees who perform judge-like functions," and the immunity "attaches when a public official's role is functionally comparable to that of a judge." *Ingram v. Township of Deptford*, 858 F. Supp.2d 386, 390 (D.N.J. 2012) (citing *Hamilton v. Levy*, 322 F.3d 776, 785 (3d Cir. 2003) and *Antoine v. Byers & Anderson, Inc.*, 508 U.S. 429, 436 (1993)). Thus, non-judge personnel of the Courts who "perform[] the function of resolving disputes or of authoritatively adjudicating private rights" (*Ingram*, 858 F. Supp.2d at 390-91 (citing *Antoine*, 508 U.S. at 435-46)) are entitled to absolute quasi-judicial immunity.

11. However, Plaintiff has not offered any facts at all in the first instance with respect to claims purportedly arising from conduct by the judges or non-judge personnel of the Courts in connection with the alleged overcrowded conditions of confinement at issue. Even though *pro se* pleadings are construed liberally and given the benefit of all reasonable inferences, Plaintiff still bears the burden of supplying the facts of his claim. See, e.g., *Mala v. Crown Bay Marina, Inc.*, 704 F.3d 239,

245 (3d Cir. 2013) (“*pro se* litigants still must allege sufficient facts in their complaints to support a claim”). It is not for the Court to investigate the facts of Plaintiff’s claim given that “[d]istrict judges have no obligation to act as counsel or paralegal to *pro se* litigants.” *Pliler v. Ford*, 542 U.S. 225, 231 (2004). The Complaint here does not identify any particular county or federal courts against whom Plaintiff asserts his claims, and neither does the Complaint set forth any factual support for this Court to infer any liability by any courts of any jurisdiction in any constitutional violation.

12. Claims against the Courts are dismissed with prejudice.

Conditions Of Confinement Claims:
Dismissed Without Prejudice

13. For the reasons set forth below, the Court will dismiss the Complaint without prejudice for failure to state a claim. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(b)(ii).

14. The present Complaint does not allege sufficient facts to support a reasonable inference that a constitutional violation has occurred in order to survive this Court’s review under § 1915. Even accepting the statements in Plaintiff’s Complaint as true for screening purposes only, there is not enough factual support for the Court to infer a constitutional violation has occurred.

15. To survive *sua sponte* screening for failure to state a claim³, the Complaint must allege "sufficient factual matter" to show that the claim is facially plausible. *Fowler v. UPMS Shadyside*, 578 F.3d 203, 210 (3d Cir. 2009) (citation omitted). "A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged." *Fair Wind Sailing, Inc. v. Dempster*, 764 F.3d 303, 308 n.3 (3d Cir. 2014). "[A] pleading that offers 'labels or conclusions' or 'a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not do.'" *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007)). Moreover, while *pro se* pleadings are liberally construed, "*pro se* litigants still must allege sufficient facts in their complaints to support a claim." *Mala v. Crown Bay Marina, Inc.*, 704 F.3d 239, 245 (3d Cir. 2013) (citation omitted) (emphasis added).

³ "The legal standard for dismissing a complaint for failure to state a claim pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) is the same as that for dismissing a complaint pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6)." *Samuels v. Health Dep't*, No. 16-1289, 2017 WL 26884, slip op. at *2 (D.N.J. Jan. 3, 2017) (citing *Schreane v. Seana*, 506 F. App'x 120, 122 (3d Cir. 2012)); *Allah v. Seiverling*, 229 F.3d 220, 223 (3d Cir. 2000)); *Mitchell v. Beard*, 492 F. App'x 230, 232 (3d Cir. 2012) (discussing 28 U.S.C. § 1997e(c)(1)); *Courteau v. United States*, 287 F. App'x 159, 162 (3d Cir. 2008) (discussing 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b)).

16. A complaint must plead sufficient facts to support a reasonable inference that a constitutional violation has occurred in order to survive this Court's review under § 1915.

17. However, with respect to the alleged facts giving rise to Plaintiff's claims, the present Complaint states in its entirety: "During my dates of incarceration, I slept [*sic*] on the floor while the other 2 or 3 i[n]mate[s] used th[e] toilet above my head constantly." Complaint § III(C).

18. Plaintiff does not identify the date(s) or time(s) of these alleged incidents. *Id.* § III(B) (blank).

19. The Complaint does not identify or otherwise describe any injuries sustained by Plaintiff in connection with these events. *Id.* § IV (blank).

20. With respect to requested relief, Plaintiff seeks "compensation from being housed in an overcrowded facility and unsafe conditions." *Id.* § V.

21. Even construing the Complaint as seeking to bring a civil rights complaint pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 for alleged prison overcrowding, any such purported claims must be dismissed because the Complaint does not set forth sufficient factual support for the Court to infer that a constitutional violation has occurred.

22. The mere fact that an individual is lodged temporarily in a cell with more persons than its intended design does not

rise to the level of a constitutional violation. See *Rhodes v. Chapman*, 452 U.S. 337, 348–50 (1981) (holding double-celling by itself did not violate Eighth Amendment); *Carson v. Mulvihill*, 488 F. App'x 554, 560 (3d Cir. 2012) (“[M]ere double-bunking does not constitute punishment, because there is no ‘one man, one cell principle lurking in the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment.’” (quoting *Bell v. Wolfish*, 441 U.S. 520, 542 (1979))). More is needed to demonstrate that such crowded conditions, for a pretrial detainee, shocks the conscience and thus violates due process rights. See *Hubbard v. Taylor*, 538 F.3d 229, 233 (3d Cir. 2008) (noting due process analysis requires courts to consider whether the totality of the conditions “cause[s] inmates to endure such genuine privations and hardship over an extended period of time, that the adverse conditions become excessive in relation to the purposes assigned to them.”). Some relevant factors are the length of the confinement(s), whether plaintiff was a pretrial detainee or convicted prisoner, any specific individuals who were involved in creating or failing to remedy the conditions of confinement, any other relevant facts regarding the conditions of confinement, etc.

23. Moreover, as to claims against CCPS and the City, Plaintiff has not pled sufficient facts to impose liability on these defendants. The CCPS is not a separate legal entity from

Camden County and is therefore not independently subject to suit. See *Bermudez v. Essex Cty. D.O.C.*, No. 12-6035, 2013 WL 1405263, at *5 (D.N.J. Apr. 4, 2013) (“[A] local government unit is not liable pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 solely under a theory of *respondeat superior*”) (citing cases). In addition, “[t]here is no *respondeat superior* theory of municipal liability, so a city may not be held vicariously liable under § 1983 for the actions of its agents. Rather, a municipality may be held liable only if its policy or custom is the ‘moving force’ behind a constitutional violation.” *Sanford v. Stiles*, 456 F.3d 298, 314 (3d Cir. 2006) (citing *Monell v. N.Y.C. Dep’t of Social Services*, 436 U.S. 658, 691 (1978)). See also *Collins v. City of Harker Heights*, 503 U.S. 115, 122 (1992) (“The city is not vicariously liable under § 1983 for the constitutional torts of its agents: It is only liable when it can be fairly said that the city itself is the wrongdoer.”). Therefore, Plaintiff must plead facts showing that the relevant Camden County and City of Camden policy-makers are “responsible for either the affirmative proclamation of a policy or acquiescence in a well-settled custom.” *Bielewicz v. Dubinon*, 915 F.2d 845, 850 (3d Cir. 1990).⁴

⁴ “Policy is made when a decisionmaker possess[ing] final authority to establish municipal policy with respect to the action issues an official proclamation, policy, or edict. Government custom can be demonstrated by showing that a given course of conduct, although not specifically endorsed or authorized by law, is so well-settled and permanent as virtually

In other words, Plaintiff must set forth facts supporting an inference that Camden County and the City of Camden were each the "moving force" behind an alleged constitutional violation. *Monell*, 436 U.S. at 689.

24. Plaintiff may be able to amend the Complaint to particularly identify adverse conditions that were caused by specific state actors, that caused Plaintiff to endure genuine privations and hardship over an extended period of time, and that were excessive in relation to their purposes. To that end, the Court shall grant Plaintiff leave to amend the Complaint within 30 days of the date of this order.⁵

25. Plaintiff is further advised that any amended complaint must plead specific facts regarding the conditions of confinement. In the event Plaintiff files an amended complaint, Plaintiff must plead sufficient facts to support a reasonable inference that a constitutional violation has occurred in order to survive this Court's review under § 1915.

26. Plaintiff should note that when an amended complaint is filed, the original complaint no longer performs any function in the case and cannot be utilized to cure defects in the

to constitute law." *Kirkland v. DiLeo*, 581 F. App'x 111, 118 (3d Cir. 2014) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted) (alteration in original).

⁵ The amended complaint shall be subject to screening prior to service.

amended complaint, unless the relevant portion is specifically incorporated in the new complaint. 6 Wright, Miller & Kane, Federal Practice and Procedure 1476 (2d ed. 1990) (footnotes omitted). An amended complaint may adopt some or all of the allegations in the original complaint, but the identification of the particular allegations to be adopted must be clear and explicit. *Id.* To avoid confusion, the safer course is to file an amended complaint that is complete in itself. *Id.* The amended complaint may not adopt or repeat claims that have been dismissed with prejudice by the Court.

27. For the reasons stated above, the Complaint is: (a) dismissed with prejudice as to the CCJ; and (b) dismissed without prejudice for failure to state a claim.

28. An appropriate order follows.

May 1, 2017
Date

s/ Jerome B. Simandle
JEROME B. SIMANDLE
Chief U.S. District Judge